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Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
EB-08 OMB-01 TRSE-00 /075 W
----------051180 091503Z /43
R 091446Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5934
INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK
SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTION RESULTS POLITICALLY
INCONCLUSIVE

REF: LONDON 7070

SUMMARY: THE RESULTS OF THE MAY 4 LOCAL ELECTIONS IN ENGLAND WERE LARGELY ANODYNE, GIVING ALL PARTIES SOMETHING ENCOURAGING BUT NOTHING DECISIVE. ALTHOUGH LABOR LOST A NET 25 SEATS, IT DID RATHER WELL IN THE NORTH, WHICH HAS MANY MARGINAL PARLIAMENTARY SEATS, AND SAW THE TORY SWING DROP TO ABOUT FOUR PERCENT FROM 12 PERCENT IN THE 1976 LOCAL ELECTIONS.

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THE CONSERVATIVES, WITH THE SWING IN THEIR FAVOR, PICKED UP A NET 54 SEATS AND WON CONTROL OF THREE LONDON BOROUGHS. THE LIBERALS, WHO HAD BEEN BATTERED IN RECENT BY-ELECTIONS, PERHAPS HAD THE MOST TO BE HAPPY ABOUT. THEY LOST ONLY FOUR SEATS AND WERE ABLE TO CLAIM THAT THEIR VOTE HAD HELD UP QUITE WELL. IN
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OUR VIEW THE LOW TURNOUT, THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL ISSUES AND THE ABSENCE OF ANY NATION-WIDE PATTERN MEAN THE RESULTS ARE OF LITTLE SIGNIFICANCE IN TERMS OF THEIR POSSIBLE GENERAL ELECTION IMPLICATIONS. MOST OBSERVERS, HOWEVER, AGREE THAT THEY VIRTUALLY PRECLUDE CALLAGHAN FROM CALLING A SNAP ELECTION IN JUNE. END SUMMARY.

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1. THE RESULTS OF THE MAY 4 LOCAL ELECTIONS IN ENGLAND, IN MARKED CONTRAST TO THOSE IN SCOTLAND (REFTEL), WERE REMARKABLY ANODYNE. THEY REVEALED NO SHARP SWINGS TO ANY PARTY, NO DRAMATIC CHANGES OR REVERSALS AND FEW INDICATORS THAT ANALYSTS COULD FIX UPON TO ANTICIPATE GENERAL ELECTION TRENDS. THE OVERALL SWING, COMPARED TO OCTOBER 1974, WAS BETWEEN THREE AND FOUR PERCENT TOWARD THE TORIES, DOWN SIGNIFICANTLY FROM THE 12-PERCENT TORY SWING REGISTERED IN THE 1976 LOCAL ELECTIONS. AFTER CONSIDERATION WAS GIVEN TO THE NORMAL TENDENCY FOR THE PARTY OUT OF GOVERNMENT TO DO BETTER THAN THE ONE IN POWER, THE LOW-VOTER TURNOUT, THE APPARENT IMPACT OF LOCAL ISSUES AND THE LACK OF ANY NATIONAL PATTERN, MOST COMMENTATORS AGREED THAT THEY WERE OF LITTLE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCE.

2. WHILE THE CONSERVATIVES WERE ABLE TO FIND FAVORABLE AUGURIES IN THEIR SLIGHT IMPROVEMENT OVER OCTOBER 1974. THEIR CAPTURE OF THREE LONDON BOROUGHS (HILLINGDON, EALING AND WANDSWORTH -- IN WHICH INCUMBENT LABOR ADMINISTRATIONS HAD INCREASED LOCAL TAXES BY MORE THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE) AND THEIR NET GAIN OF 54 SEATS NATIONALLY, THEIR PERFORMANCE WAS WEAKER THAN THEY (AND MOST OBSERVERS) HAD ANTICIPATED. MOREOVER, THEIR PERFORMANCE IN THE NORTHWEST. WHERE THERE ARE AN UN-
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USUALLY LARGE NUMBER OF MARGINAL PARLIAMENTARY SEATS AT STAKE, WAS DISAPPOINTING. AND WHILE LABOR LOST A NET 25 SEATS, INCLUDING CONTROL OF THE THREE LONDON

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BOROUGHS, ITS LEADERS WERE ABLE TO TAKE COMFORT IN THEIR RETENTION OF CONTROL IN MANCHESTER, THEIR RELATIVELY STRONG SHOWING ELSEWHERE IN THE NORTH AND THEIR RECAPTURE OF MUCH OF THE GROUND LOST IN THE 1976 ELECTION. NEARLY ALL OBSERVERS AGREED THAT LABOR HAD DONE BETTER THAN EXPECTED, BUT COULD NOT BE RATED A GENERAL ELECTION FAVORITE ON THE BASIS OF ITS SHOWING. IF ANY OF THE NATIONAL PARTIES COULD BE TRULY HAPPY WITH THE OUTCOME, IT WAS THE LIBERALS -- AND THEY LOST A NET FOUR SEATS. BUT COMPARED TO THEIR RECENT BY-ELECTION PERFORMANCES AND THEIR CURRENT STANDINGS IN THE POLLS, IT WAS A SURPRISINGLY IMPRESSIVE RESULT. ALTHOUGH LIBERAL SPOKESMEN CLAIMED THAT THE OUTCOME SHOWED THE PENDULUM HAD BEGUN TO SWING BACK IN THEIR DIRECTION, FEW ANALYSTS WERE READY TO ACCEPT THAT JUDGMENT. LOCAL ISSUES, PARTICULARLY IN THOSE AREAS WHERE THE LIBERALS ARE STRONGEST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT (E.G. LIVERPOOL), WERE JUDGED TOO IMPORTANT TO GIVE THE RESULTS ANY NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE. INDEPENDENTS, LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS AND OTHER GROUPS LOST A NET 25 SEATS. BUT PERHAPS
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THE MOST INTERESTING DEVELOPMENT WAS THE POOR SHOWING OF THE NATIONAL FRONT (NF) CANDIDATES THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. THIS PARTY'S TOTAL SHARE OF THE VOTE WAS DOWN FROM THREE PERCENT IN MAY 1976 TO ABOUT TWO PERCENT, AND ITS FORTUNES VIRTUALLY COLLAPSED IN NEARLY ALL THOSE WARDS WHERE IT HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN STRONGEST.

3. ALTHOUGH THERE WAS LITTLE ANALYSTS COULD EXTRACT FROM THE FINAL OUTCOME, THEY WERE ABLE TO REACH A CONSENSUS THAT THE RESULTS WOULD NOT GIVE CALLAGHAN ANY REASON TO CALL A JUNE ELECTION -- AN OPTION THAT MANY HAD PUT FORWARD AS A SERIOUS POSSIBILITY IF LABOR HAD DONE ESPECIALLY WELL -- AND WE CERTAINLY CONCUR IN THAT JUDGMENT, IF NOT THE PREMISE. INDEED, IN TERMS OF THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL POLITICS, THE LOCAL ELECTIONS MIGHT NEVER HAVE BEEN HELD.

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